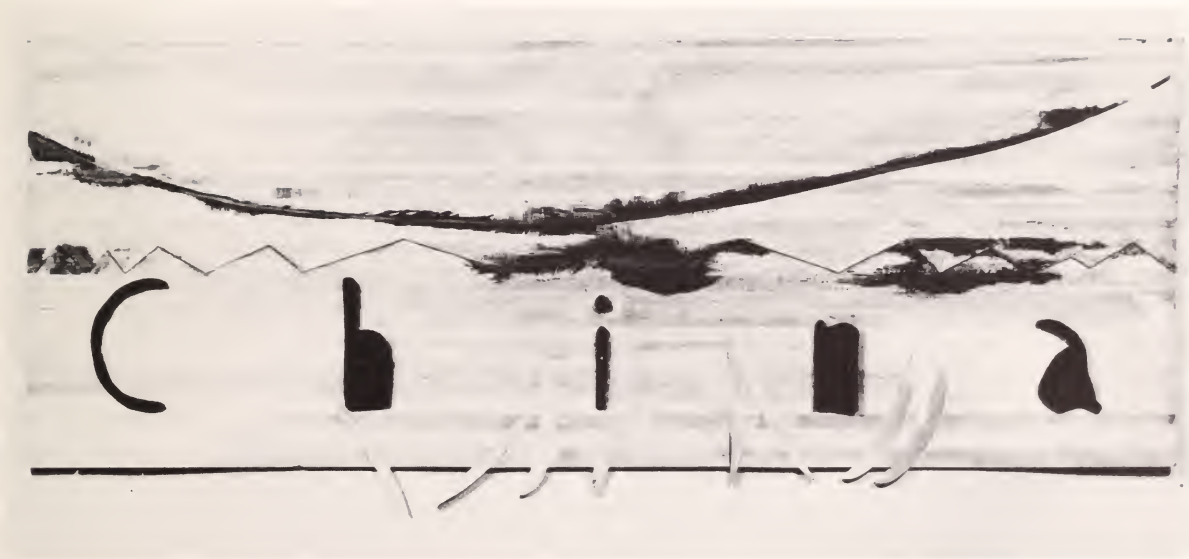


Charles Garabedian



Charles Garabedian's work is anachronistic, since it draws from various classical sources but eschews classical forms and renderings. From the time he first began to study painting (in 1957, when he was already in his early thirties) he has been indifferent to the styles and convictions of contemporary "high art." His subject matter and drawing style are idiosyncratic and arbitrary, even within the context of other California artists of his generation. On the whole, he is more closely allied to painters like Max Beckmann, Orozco or, more recently, H. C. Westermann, than to other artists in the Los Angeles community. Within the body of his own work, he changes styles and materials at whim, unpredictably, almost capriciously. Even among those he was closest to in the late 1950s and early '60s—Ed Corillo, Louis Lunetta, Max Hendler, Lance Richbourg and Roberto Chavez—he was an anomaly among eccentrics. For none of these artists are as indifferent to draftsmanship and "quality" as Garabedian.

Garabedian is a narrative painter, one who uses images in the interests of storytelling. Many of his early works (from about 1962–65) have religious subjects and are executed in a brash, thick, expressionistic style, with no concern for precise rendering, perspective, or formal composition, which usually accompanies figurative images. Rather, Garabedian's mode of execution changes, often radically with the demands of the subject matter.

Around 1965–66, Garabedian did a series of paintings (*Death of Napoleon Solo*, *Assasination*) focusing on images of violence. His idea was to deal with the innocent bystander, for instance people getting shot or run over by trucks. His chief inspiration for this period, Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1500), contains images of people doing things they couldn't help, but Garabedian was unable to find the contemporary equivalent, even in the world of TV gangsters. "So I said, hell, I'll make a man in a brick

wall." This visual analogue for victimization eventually, by 1970, had taken the form of a resin painting depicting a man literally embedded in a brick wall. In the meantime, Garabedian made many paintings, drawings and sculptures centering on the theme of China. These works constitute a thread of continuous subject matter throughout the artist's work of the past ten years.

The reason Garabedian gives for choosing China is that, because he didn't know anything at all about it, he could do whatever he wanted to. "The idea of doing something without understanding it was very attractive to me—and people had been saying I didn't know what I was doing anyhow." The first Oriental influence on his work was formal. The oblique, tilted spatial plane of *Baseball Game* (1965) probably was the result of an exhibition of Japanese art he saw in 1964 in Los Angeles. Later the Oriental influence manifested itself mostly in his subject matter, the formal aspects of Garabedian's work being perhaps subsumed by his peculiar drawing quality, which has been described as naive or primitive.

Nevertheless, his major visual influences are classical ones, notably Florentine paintings of the Renaissance. It is possible to see in Garabedian's work the influence of Mantegna's perspectival distortions, the flat, iconic forms of Giotto's and Cimabue's figures, and the peculiar compositional elements of Bellini and Masaccio. On the other hand, it is also possible to see only those crude aspects of his work—the roughness and irregularity of his drawing style—that make it anachronistic. Garabedian sees all images as "drawing problems," but not in a traditional sense of learning how to draw correctly.

Garabedian's ideas about painting center around the search for the visual equivalent of an idea, an equivalent which is singularly related to the material he is working on, "like a conversation." Because visual equivalences have nothing to do with "real"

images, he ignores draftsmanship. "I can't draw like Leonardo—or Rousseau either," he says, but then, "I don't look at things the way they did. It would be silly for me to try to render something out." The lack of rendering has led someone to call one of his large resin works (*Woman in Bathroom*, 1973) "an insult to Botticelli," which Garabedian doesn't seem to mind. "I take an antagonistic stance when I paint," he says, "either because it's the way I am or because I can't do any better. I'm not interested in developing techniques. This doesn't indicate intelligence on my part, but impatience."

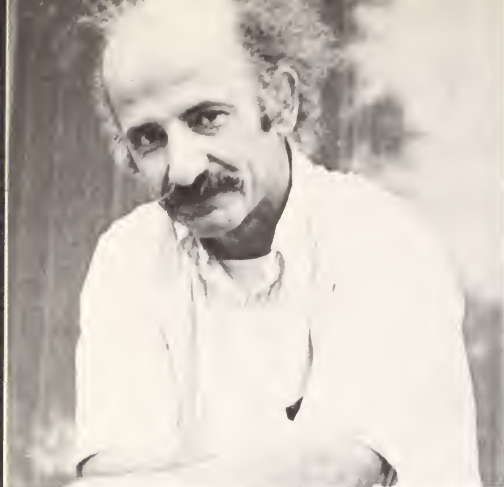
The results of his impatience are extraordinary: his works are either humble or heroic, but neither stance is dependent upon the size of the pieces. For him, narrative is not simple storytelling, but rather "a lack of unity. Narrative is the breakdown of a whole." This allows for considerable poetic license; in a large resin painting he puts a black bird between Adam and Eve because "I just hated the idea of putting a snake in." In just this way, the imaginary, erratically drawn China images give the pieces an eccentric, arbitrary ironic aspect.

China Wall (1968) and *Green China Wall* (1970), both large freestanding screens, combine a sense of mystery and purpose. Although they function as screens, they give the formal impression of haphazard, offhandedly executed, standing paintings; like most of Garabedian's work, they defy categorization and analogy, operating in a kind of stylistic no-man's-land. One series, the Henry Inn works, were inspired by the author of a book on Oriental gardens and another book on people of different racial types who now live in Hawaii. In these paintings and drawings (one of which, *Henry Inn 2*, 1970, has been destroyed) the structure of printed material and the structure of the gardens have melded into a linear, disjointed group of images. *Henry Inn 1*, on paper, contains lines which suggest the act of reading, a

tiny portrait, an upside-down bar on which is written "Gardens of China," the name Henry Inn, and a vertical configuration which resembles a series of walls or enclosures, relating to the wood and resin floor sculptures shown here and to a much earlier group of paper sculptures which Garabedian showed at the Ceeje Gallery in Los Angeles in 1967. Because of the freedom an unknown subject matter allows there is little imagistic continuity in this group of works; some are paintings, some are sculpture, some drawings.

The two most recent works in the exhibition are large paintings on canvas, a deviation from the norm for Garabedian who generally works on any material but the traditional one. *Henry Inn 4* comes directly from his last large resin painting, *Man Tearing his Heart Out* (1975). Garabedian had given up painting on canvas because, he says, "I'd learned how to do it. If you learn how to stuff olives, then you know how to do it, but it doesn't mean that you can be creative with food. Going back to painting was harder than I thought." *Chinese Mr. Hyde*, the second and most recent of the two works, is an Oriental version of one of the artist's favorite horror figures. With its immense, maliciously glowing yellow head suspended in space and the fractured drama of violent marks surrounding it, the painting completely overwhelms the senses. It defies all the rules of "good" painting, juxtaposing impossible configurations and improbable colors. In its idiosyncratic, if not absurd subject matter, it typifies the artist's attitudes to date: there is nothing tasteful about the painting, or any aspect of his work. Garabedian, instead, has established an irreverent and fortuitous sensibility and an astonishing lexicon of images infused with wit, meaning, risk and integrity.

Marcia Tucker
Curator



Photograph by Donald Morris

Charles Garabedian

Biography

- 1923 Born in Detroit, Michigan
- 1947–48 University of California, Santa Barbara
- 1949–50 B.A., history, University of Southern California, Los Angeles
- 1957–61 M.A., art, University of California, Los Angeles
- 1962–65 Lecturer, University of California, Los Angeles
- 1965–66 Visiting artist, Colorado College, Colorado Springs
- 1967–73 Assistant Professor in Residence, University of California, Los Angeles
- 1973–76 College of Creative Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara
- 1975 Visiting lecturer, California Institute of the Arts, Valencia

Cover: *China*, 1968. Collection of Charles Kessler
 Photograph by Douglas Morgan

One-Artist Exhibitions

- 1963, 65, 66, 67 Ceeje Galleries, Los Angeles
- 1966 La Jolla Museum of Art, La Jolla, California
- 1970 Eugenia Butler Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1974 Newspace Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1975 California State University, Northridge
 College of Creative Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1961 Annual juried exhibition, Los Angeles County Museum
- 1962 Tillman Carter Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1964 Fifth Annual Invitational, Whittier College, Whittier, California
- 1966 All California Exhibition, San Diego (awarded purchase prize)
- 1967 Weatherspoon annual exhibition, Art on Paper invitational, Weatherspoon Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro
- 1968 Recent West Coast sculpture invitational, California State College, Hayward
 Faculty drawing exhibition, University of California, Los Angeles (exhibition traveled)
- 1974 University of New Mexico invitational, Albuquerque
- 1975 1975 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
 Newspace, Bowers Museum, Santa Ana, California
 Newspace Gallery, Los Angeles
 Small Paintings, Anapamu Gallery, Santa Barbara, California
 January 22–February 22, 1976

Whitney Museum of American Art

945 Madison Avenue
 New York, New York 10021